

6-1-1947

The Classics and the Educationists

Frank M. Snowden

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/reprints>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Snowden, Frank M., "The Classics and the Educationists" (1947). *Faculty Reprints*. Paper 198.
<http://dh.howard.edu/reprints/198>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Reprints by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.

The Classics *and* the Educationists

By FRANK M. SNOWDEN, JR.

*Professor of Classics, Howard University,
Washington, D. C.*

THE role of the classics in secondary schools cannot be divorced from a consideration of certain prevalent educational theories. For about a quarter of a century these theories have been disseminated by departments of education, studied in teachers' colleges, and regarded by some authorities as sacrosanct. The extent to which the present attitude toward the classics has been molded by these theories is difficult to measure. Nevertheless, far too many classicists, in my judgment, have thought that time would eventually erase the influence of many of these theories. On the contrary, however, as a result of the apathy of many teachers of the liberal arts, secondary schools are often securely in the hands of the educationists. If, then, teachers of the liberal arts desire to make their significant contribution to the development of secondary education, the influence of the generation of students and administrators who have been nurtured by the effluvia of certain educational theories can no longer be ignored.

The liberal arts have been examined in recent years; necessary changes are already being effected. A similar scrutiny of the methods of the educationists, long past due, must now be

made, for it is difficult to believe that the usual explanation of unattractive salaries alone accounts for an apparent trend away from teacher training. Although the enrollment in colleges and universities of the country had reached an unprecedented height in 1946, that in teachers' colleges was still below pre-war levels.¹ The superficial methods and courses of teachers' colleges, according to a group of Louisiana schoolmen, are largely responsible for the present teacher shortage.²

For about a quarter of a century we have been witnessing the growing pains of a new profession. During this period, some educationists have made mistakes. These mistakes have included erroneous views on the value of the classics in American education. The classicist, therefore, must participate in an examination which should analyze and expose, wherever necessary, prevailing educational theory. The classicist cannot limit himself to the educationists' views on the classics but must direct attention also to general aspects of the educationists' methods which have to a large extent shaped the present popular opinion of the classics.

It is a truism, it seems to me, accepted by students of education candid

¹ B. Fine, "Teachers' Colleges are Shunned Despite the Shortage and Crowding of Other Schools," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1946, p. E.7. Cf. *Time*, XLVIII (1946), No. 11, p. 59 for the information that fewer than half of the new students at Milwaukee's State Teachers College and only ten percent of those at San Diego State College were enrolled in teacher training.

² M. Illson, "Teacher Colleges Face Criticism," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1946, p. E.7.

enough to admit it, that education courses are often replete with otiose emphases on the obvious, needless duplications, excessive stress on pedagogy, a concomitant neglect of subject-matter, and a frequent dissemination of false notions.

An example of an otiose emphasis on the obvious appears in a beginners' book in education which contains the following observation on the "Universality of Individual Differences":

"Of the billions of fishes in the sea, of the thousands of leaves upon a tree, of the countless snowflakes in a snow-storm, of the billions of pebbles along the beach, and of the millions of people in the world, any careful and detailed examinations will show that no two specimens are alike. Even casual observation will show that *individual differences are universal*. It is exceedingly difficult to find two pupils with many similar characteristics."³

An awareness of individual differences, however, is nothing new. Plato stated this principle succinctly as follows:

... we are not all alike; there are diversities of natures among us which are adapted to different occupations.⁴

Quintilian says simply of the same matter:

Praestat tamen ingenio alius alium.⁵

Another illustration of padding the obvious appears under the caption "Knowledge of subjects to be taught":

3 W. G. Reeder, *A First Course in Education*, revised edition, New York, 1945, p. 208.

4 *Republic*, 370, translated by B. Jowett, The Modern Library, p. 61.

5 *Institutio Oratoria*, 1, 1, 2-3.

6 Reeder, *op. cit.*, pp. 517-518. Another illustration of this point appears in J. L. Mursell, *The Psychology of Secondary School Training*, New York, 1932, p. 65, in which the author describes the law of recency as follows: "This is the principle that something recently learned is more efficiently grasped and can be more effectively reproduced than something equally well learned some time ago."

7 *Institutio Oratoria*.

"A person cannot teach something which he does not know; he may make the attempt, but the result is sure to be a bluffing, stumbling, and bungling effort. Therefore another requisite for the teacher is an excellent command of the subjects which he will teach. Arithmetic cannot be taught unless the teacher knows arithmetic, and grammar cannot be taught unless the teacher knows grammar. The same remark is true for all subjects."⁶

After a reading of the recent handbooks on pedagogy, one is often left with the impression that the principles discussed are the discoveries of recent times. Modern books, on the contrary, are in many cases only bringing forth methods which good teachers have always advocated. Listed below, for example, are some of the "modern" points of educational significance which Quintilian discussed:

a. The educability of all children, 1.1.1-4.

b. The importance of environment, 1.1.4-9.

c. The significance of childhood impressions, 1.1.5.

d. Pre-school training or the proper use of ages one to seven, 1.1.15-19.

e. The proper motivation of young children, 1.1.20.

f. On teaching the alphabet, 1. 1. 24-37.

g. The importance of relaxation and of holidays, 1.3.8-11.

h. The educational value of games, 1.3.11-12.

i. Objections to the application of corporal punishment in school, 1.3.13-18.

Although Quintilian, many centuries ago, gave an adequate treatment to most of these points, recent books have devoted entire chapters to the same points without adding much of significance.

Closely related to the distention of the evident is the duplication apparent in many courses. A cursory examination of standard textbooks on junior and senior high school methods reveals considerable overlapping and raises the question as to whether the problems of junior and senior high schools are sufficiently different to require two separate courses. Discussions of visual aids and the radio, for example, appear in textbooks designed for prospective teachers of both junior high and secondary schools.⁸ Much of the other material in books of this type is applicable to junior and senior high school alike. Why two books? Why two courses? If the duplication is as rife as a cursory examination indicates, much valuable time is lost and matters of importance must therefore be neglected.

It is also evident that requirements in "hours of education," originally set up in many cases because of the educationists' influence, often result in a concomitant neglect of subject-matter. Prospective elementary school teachers in certain Louisiana teachers' colleges take only twelve hours of English and six hours of mathematics, as compared with forty-one hours of education.⁹ The situation in our nation's Capital

is not much better. Regular elementary school teachers must have completed forty semester credits in education; junior and senior high school teachers must have had not less than twenty-four semester credits in education.¹⁰ The prescription of such a requirement is at least open to question. Is it desirable for a prospective high school teacher to devote twenty-four hours to courses in education, when a teacher is expected to enlarge the students' horizon and to reveal a richer and more complex world than that which the students bring with them to the classroom?

Defects of the type which I have already described should be sufficient to demonstrate that certain educationists have been far from infallible in their zeal to improve the American educational system. In addition, however, the educationists have often been responsible for the dissemination of false notions about the value of certain school subjects. Few subjects have suffered in this respect more than the classics. For many years it has been customary for the educationists to point to the classics as examples of a decadent educational program. "Latinless" and "Greekless" students have often accepted the fashionable disparagement of the classics. The classicist, therefore, must dissipate whatever false notions exist and must show how great a contribution the classics can make to secondary education. In order to achieve the latter, the classicist must often translate his subject into the current language of curriculum builders, for experience has shown

8 Cf. J. G. Umstattd, *Secondary School Teaching*, new edition, Boston, 1944, pp. 290-359 for chapters entitled "Visual Aids in Learning Exercises" and "The Radio in Education;" and M. M. Smith *et al.*, *Junior High School Education*, New York and London, 1942, pp. 287-319 for chapter entitled "Objective Aids to Instruction."

9 M. Illson, *loc. cit.*, p. E.7.

10 Excerpts from School Document No. 28 and Chapter IX of the Rules of the Board of Education, Public Schools of the District of Columbia, pp. 4, 6, 7, 12.

that when the teacher of the classics ignores prevailing educational trends, he often runs the risk of doing irreparable damage to the cause of classical instruction.¹¹ The classicist knows that there are few fundamental problems with which the Greeks and Romans did not deal. Whenever the educationists change their cant, the classicist should demonstrate that, no matter in what argot the aims of education may be stated, there are few subjects from art to zoology which cannot be illumined by the classics. The seven cardinal principles of education, for example, are viewed with high regard by educationists.¹² Therefore, as long as these principles enjoy their present sacrosanctity, the classicist should interpret his subject in the light of them.

"Command of fundamental processes," the second of the seven cardinal principles, has as its objective the command of certain processes such as reading, writing, and the elements of oral and written expression. In spite of the importance which is attached to this principle, it is now an accepted fact among both high school teachers and college professors that students today do not speak understandingly or read well. It is the educationists themselves, in my judgment, who must share a large part of the responsibility for the poor reading and writing habits of today's students. Almost calamitous in its enervating effect upon the student's ability to express

himself has been the widespread adoption of the "circlings," "matchings," and "completions," of the so-called new-type examination. I can conceive of a situation in which a student may "check" his way out of many courses without having ever written a complete sentence, to say nothing of a complete paragraph. Further, according to the recommendations of certain investigators, the solution for current vocabulary problems should be sought in the excision of "difficult" words from not only secondary but even college texts.¹³ Such a "solution" is no solution.

That a knowledge of Latin and Greek can contribute to an understanding of English words has been apparent ever since the publication of Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabetical* in 1604. An acquaintance with important Latin and Greek roots, whether acquired in language courses or in separate vocabulary courses, would make unnecessary systematic vocabulary training often required to promote the understanding of mathematical, geographical, historical and other terminology.¹⁴ A student of the classical languages, particularly if his attention is called to the identical elements involved in the transfer, knows hundreds of roots from which thousands of common and technical words are derived. Such a student needs little training in vocabulary; he can devote his entire energies to the study of a particular subject.

There are two frequently repeated

11 In this connection, see my articles written at a time when many administrators were demanding that "war aims" should determine the offerings of the secondary schools: "The Classics as a Basis for the Study of World War II," *The Classical Outlook*, XIX (1942), pp. 53-54 and "The Classics and War Aims in Secondary Education," *The Classical Outlook*, XX (1943), pp. 33-34.

12 J. G. Umstattd, pp. 30-31.

13 E. N. Stevenson, "An Investigation of the Vocabulary Problem in College Biology," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, XXVIII (1937), pp. 663-672; M. L. Fisher, "Vocabulary Difficulties of Students in Educational Psychology," *Educational Research Record*, I (1928), pp. 19-23, 27-30.

14 A. I. Gates, et al., *Educational Psychology*, New York, 1942, p. 442.

objections to the aid which Latin and Greek can offer for the solution of the grave problems of vocabulary difficulties. (1) If half the time required for Latin or Greek were given to the additional study of English, the results would be far better. Few English teachers, however, even under such circumstances, would refuse the benefits that would be derived from classical instruction. The problems of reading and of written expression are so serious that assistance from every source is welcomed by most teachers. The educationists themselves admit the need for special work in vocabulary study if students are to improve their comprehension of school subjects.¹⁵ A recent book on remedial reading attaches importance to a knowledge of Greek and Latin roots.¹⁶ (2) The second objection is so incredible that the exact language of one of its protagonists should be cited:

"It seems not unreasonable to argue that such instruction (i.e. in English words derived from Latin, allusions to the classics in literature and history) tends to make the Latin class also a class in English word study, mythology, and ancient history. There is surely a question as to whether such values cannot be obtained more directly and much more economically, without the burden of the complicated Latin grammar and syntax."¹⁷

Such a statement, in my opinion, shows no understanding of the mean-

ing of education, to say nothing of the significance of classical culture. When I read a statement of this type, Northrop's recent observation comes to my mind, namely, that professors of education have been attracted to certain erroneous assumptions derived from Dewey because they are thereby freed from the need of knowing any specific subject they teach.¹⁸ The classics are valuable for the very reason that Pressey considers them objectionable. A class in Latin or Greek, it is true, may be a class not only in word study, mythology, and ancient history, but also in political science, economics, philosophy, or even education. Finally, the complicated Latin which Pressey regards as a burden, is, in the judgment of the Harvard Report, valuable in illuminating the syntax and vocabulary of English.¹⁹

Similarly, the classicist should show that the classics can serve other cardinal principles of education. In connection with the first principle of "health," it might be pointed out that today's student can learn much from the Greek tradition of athletics and from the educational ideal of "mens sana in corpore sano" appearing in Juvenal.

A study of Periclean Athens would not be inappropriate in a unit having as its objective the fifth cardinal principle "civic education." The Funeral Oration of Pericles, for example, could provide the basis for a discus-

15 A. I. Gates, *ibid.* Cf. E. N. Stevenson and M. L. Fisher cited in note 13.

16 Cf. F. O. Trigg, *Remedial Reading: The Diagnosis and Correction of Reading Difficulties at the College Level*, Minneapolis, 1943, pp. 126-127.

17 S. L. Pressey, *Psychology and the New Education*, New York and London, 1933, pp. 509-510.

18 F. S. C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding*, New York, 1946, p. 152.

19 *General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee*, Cambridge, 1945, p. 124.

sion in which, according to the language of this principle, the aim is to develop in the individual "those qualities whereby he will act well his part as a member of a neighborhood, town or city, State, and Nation . . ." as well as "a many-sided interest in the welfare of the communities to which one belongs; loyalty to ideas of civic righteousness . . ."

Art and literature are important media in developing the objectives of the third and sixth cardinal principles—"worthy home membership" and "worthy use of leisure time." According to the definition of the former, "Literature should interpret and idealize the human elements that go to make the home. Music and art should result in more beautiful homes and in greater joy therein . . ." Classical literature, from Homer's picture of Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax to Horace's "*felices ter et amplius etc.*" is not lacking in substance which might contribute to this aim. Nor is it unreasonable to argue that an acquaintance with ancient classical art might assist in the development of values which would "result in more beautiful homes and in greater joy therein . . ."

"Worthy use of leisure time" is defined as follows:

"Education should equip the individual to secure from his leisure the recreation of body, mind and spirit, and the enrichment and enlargement of his personality."

A cursory glance at certain best sellers, at the tabloids of our cities, and at the scripts of soap operas leaves little doubt that leisure time in our country could be more profitably

spent. The future of America depends to a great extent upon what use its citizens make of leisure time. If the ability to read—not the hasty and superficial reading that is all too common—is developed in our youth, if an interest in the great cultural heritage of the West is stimulated when minds are plastic, if a genuine appreciation of the good and the beautiful in art and literature is developed in school, it can be hoped that our citizens may lead richer and fuller lives. In the fulfillment of this aim—"the worthy use of leisure time"—the classics can make a substantial contribution.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the present is a very propitious moment for the classicist to participate in an examination of certain educational theories, and to direct the attention of the "Latinless" and "Greekless" public to the value of the classics. The classicist should capitalize on what is apparently a revival of interest in the classics. Many a "Latinless" and "Greekless" American has probably already begun to question what he was taught about the uselessness of the classics, when he reads week after week in current periodicals lessons to be learned from the Greeks and the Romans.²⁰ Many a "Latinless" and "Greekless" American has probably already been impressed by the modernity of the classics discussed on the "Invitation to Learning" program. The present moment, therefore, is the time to examine the educationists and to convince the already skeptical "Latinless" and "Greekless" public that the educationists have not been infallible. *Carpe diem.*

20 Cf. *Life*, "Untragic America," XXI (1946), No. 23, p. 32; "Democracy," XXII (1947), No. 7, p. 28; series of articles on "The History of Western Culture," announced in XXII (1947), No. 9, p. 69.